



## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT SLIEVENACLOY, COUNTY ANTRIM, JUNE 2015**

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In June 2015 the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology at Queen's University Belfast held its annual Level 2 undergraduate training excavation at Slievenacloy, Co. Antrim, in collaboration with the Belfast Hills Partnership and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Slievenacloy is a large sub-rectangular enclosure, measuring 108m east-west and 98m north-south (Grid Reference J24537083; NISMR ANT 064:087; Figure 1; Plate 1), defined by a ditch with an accompanying bank, and with evidence for a second bank surviving along its western and southern sides. The bank and ditch to the east of the enclosure was damaged in 1984 by the construction of a new lane to provide agricultural access to the land to the south of the enclosure, while the ditch and banks to the south have been interrupted by modern field drains and fences. Despite these interventions, however, the monument retains its morphology remarkably well and, set within an ASSI, it remains a highly visible archaeological feature on this bleak upland landscape.

The date and function of this large enclosure, however, have not been resolved. The site is absent from any early maps, most notably the first edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map, although its existence is recorded in the accompanying Ordnance Survey Memoirs of 1837, where its form and dimensions are noted. Brian Williams conducted a small excavation at the site on behalf of the Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch of the DoE in 1984 in response to damage to the enclosure caused by the construction of the new lane along its eastern side (Williams 1985). This work involved the excavation of a section through the damaged bank which helped reveal its structure but was of too small-scale a nature to help define the origins and use of the site in antiquity, save for the discovery of a single fragment of eighteenth century (and probably locally produced) glazed earthenware amid the soil that had been disturbed

during the demolition work. Noting that the site did not fit easily into the “existing classifications of field monuments” (ibid., 152) in Ireland, and taking his lead from the contents of the Ordnance Survey Memoirs which had speculated that the site may have been an artillery fort, Williams cautiously concluded that the monument may have been associated with seventeenth century military activity in the area, but added that “this is not clear” (ibid). Indeed, the presence of a now abandoned Early Modern farmhouse with associated outbuildings approximately 100m to the west of the enclosure may be the source of the pottery sherd that was discovered during Williams’ investigation. Following William’s work little further study was conducted at the site until interest in the monument was again raised through the work of the Belfast Hills Partnership, an independent charity which seeks to improve how the hills are managed and valued as a resource for education and well-being among the local population. As part of this work the Belfast Hills Partnership and archaeologists from Queen’s University Belfast, led by Dr Eileen Murphy, Sarah Gormley and Dr Siobhan McDermott, conducted a programme of topographical (October 2013) and geophysical (March 2014) surveying with Masters students in the south-west quadrant of the enclosure’s interior. This work revealed the presence of a small rectangular structure which strongly resembled the foundations for a house.

Building on the work achieved during the survey the Belfast Hills Partnership obtained funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to enable a community-led archaeological excavation to be undertaken at the site through a partnership with Queen’s University Belfast and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in June 2015, with the excavation focused on three areas. The first of these was the rectangular structure that the survey work had identified in the south-west quadrant of the site (Trench 1), while a section was also to be excavated through the ditch and bank surrounding the enclosure (Trench 2) on its south-east side. A third trench (Trench 4) was opened in the centre of the enclosed area in an effort to determine evidence for activity in the interior of the monument. It was intended that a fourth trench (Trench 3) would investigate a series of earthwork features located outside the enclosure at its south-west corner, but the excavation here did not proceed due to pressure of time and – although de-turfed – the trench was subsequently re-turfed and abandoned (see Figure 1 for the location of the trenches opened in 2015).

### ***Excavation within Trench 1***

Trench 1 measured 6m by 6m and was located over the southern half of the structure identified during the topographical and geophysical survey in the south-western interior of the enclosure (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Immediately upon removal of the sod (Context 100) a number of different loam topsoil variants (Contexts 101, 103, 106 and 107) were encountered (Figure 3 and 4). The tops of the stones of a dry-stone revetment (Context 102) were visible protruding through the topsoil. When these topsoil layers were removed a dark brown, friable, loam was encountered (Context 108). It contained coarse pottery, some Medieval but some probably Middle Neolithic, and charcoal fragments and, although badly disturbed by root action, it is likely that this was an occupation layer. At the base of this disturbed occupation material there were two spreads of dark loam (Contexts 113 and 116) which seem to have been undisturbed patches of occupation material.

With the occupation material excavated and sampled the structural elements of the building were clearly visible. The building was defined by a thick earthen wall (Context 110), which was up to 1.25m wide, which was internally reveted by stones (Context 102) (Figure 2 and Plate 2). The earthen wall was composed of sods which appear to have been dug from the old ground surface within the building's interior footprint, in effect creating a building with a slightly sunken floor. A gap, measuring approximately 40cm wide, was located in the southern wall of the structure, but it seems too narrow to have functioned as a primary entrance and it is perhaps more likely that it was for drainage purposes. There may, however, have been an entrance in the west wall; the excavation trench clipped a gap in the stone revetment and the wall material (Context 110), visible in the northern end of the west section of Trench 1 (Figure 4).

There were a number of stone spreads within the interior of the structure which may represent the remains of internal fixtures within the building (Figure 2). In the south-east of the building there was a curving deposit of stone (Context 115), approximately following the line of the south-east wall. These stones were initially interpreted as collapse from the wall revetment but upon their removal it became clear that they had been placed directly upon Context 117, the reddish-brown silty loam on which the house was constructed. It seems likely that they were deliberately deposited as a base or footing for internal fixtures. The west wall had a patch of less well defined stones in the south-west corner of the trench. This absence of stone footings may be consistent with the entrance to the structure having been along this side of the building.

In addition to a few sherds of Early Modern pottery discovered in the topsoil zone, the artefacts from the Medieval building's occupation layers comprised primarily of sherds of Medieval Ulster Coarse pottery and Souterrain Ware. Souterrain Ware is first produced in Ulster in the mid-eighth century (McSparron, in press) but its use continued until probably as late as the fourteenth century, as evidenced by its discovery (apparently in a primary depositional context) in a fourteenth century layer at Tullylish, Co. Armagh (Ivens 1987, 87). Medieval Ulster Coarse pottery emerges in the mid-thirteenth century and continues in use into the seventeenth century (McSparron 2012). The presence of both forms of pottery in the same contexts in the Slievenacloy house therefore suggests that the structure was being occupied between the mid-thirteenth century, when Medieval Ulster Coarse pottery first appears, and the mid-fourteenth century when Souterrain Ware passes out of use.

In addition to these Medieval pottery sherds, however, a few pieces of thin, well fired, light coloured, decorated and probable Middle Neolithic pottery were also discovered within the house and, as the excavation of the Medieval building drew to a close, it became apparent that there were several features in the middle of the trench which were not contemporary with its Medieval occupation, but which had been disturbed by its construction, specifically through the removal of sods from its footprint to make the walls of the Medieval house (Context 110). A linear gully (Context 125) emerged from the north section and cut the reddish friable loam (Context 117) (Figure 5 and Plate 3). It was 2.6m long and 0.35m wide and 0.35-40 m deep and ran approximately from north to south. Its base was packed with large stones and a grey-brown sticky clay loam (Context 127). At its top it widened and was filled by a mid-brown friable loam with lots of small stones, resembling a mettled surface (Context 122), which was partly covered by a similar, friable loam but with charcoal fragments (Context 120). About 1.8m to the west of the southern end of the gully there was a post-hole (Context 126), 0.4m in diameter and 0.3m deep, filled by a grey loam and packing stones (Context 123). In between the gully and posthole there was a tear-shaped, shallow pit (Context 124) which was filled by a charcoal rich loam (Context 119) and covered by a scatter of small stones (Context 121).

A 3D photogrammetrical survey of the trench was undertaken by Dr Siobhan McDermott (Plate 6) at the conclusion of the excavation and a 3D digital model generated, before the Medieval house (including its walls and their stone revetment), and the earlier - possibly Neolithic - features were preserved intact beneath a layer of geotextile fabric, the trench backfilled and re-turfed, and the ground surface reconstituted.

### ***Excavation within Trench 2***

The enclosure at Slievenacloy is defined by its banks and ditches and to discover more about the form, construction and date of these earthworks a trench (Trench 2) was excavated across the ditch at the south-east side of the monument (Figure 1). The trench was initially 14m long and 1m wide but was subsequently widened out to an area of 4m by 4m over the ditch and a small section of its associated bank (Figure 6 and 7, Plate 4 and 5). The ditch (Context 209) was 1.7m deep at its deepest, measured from the ancient ground surface, or 1.9m deep measured from the modern ground surface. It appeared to have been excavated from the ancient ground surface (Context 214), but it also cut into an orange subsoil (Context 210) and an underlying blue-grey subsoil (Context 207). Its width was not able to be accurately assessed due to disturbance at the southern side of the ditch, where a modern field drain had compromised the archaeological strata. If this field drain had been disturbed it would have flooded this otherwise relatively dry section of the ditch and this in turn would have led to the termination of the excavation. It can be suggested, however, that the ditch was certainly 3.5m wide and in total it was probably in the region of 5m to 6m in width.

The primary basal fill was a dark brown peat (Context 208) which was 1.2m thick. The only artefact in an archaeological context discovered from within the trench was a Medieval wooden gaming piece which was located about 20cm from the base of this peaty fill. An orange coloured clay (Context 206) sat above the top of the peat deposit. This clay contained fragments of flint (some of which may have been struck) and some Post-Medieval and Early Modern pottery sherds. It can be suggested that this was a deposit laid down in relatively recent times in an effort to stabilize the marshy surface of the ditch. A deposit of large stones (Context 205) seems then to have been set down to supplement this clay layer, with a thin layer of topsoil (Context 202) covering over these stones.

The material for the bank (Context 203) was derived from the fills of the ditch (Context 209) when it was originally excavated in antiquity. On the northern and interior side of the bank there was a shallow gully (Context 211), which may have been designed to channel water away from the base of the bank. It was filled by a light grey-brown clay (Context 212) and both the gully and its fill were in turn covered by a layer of slump from the bank (Context 215). The bank generally retained its profile and there was only minimum evidence of slumping, with little evidence for bank material within the peaty material (Context 208) that filled the upper levels of

the ditch. Slumping may have been prevented because of a revetment of the bank with some large stones at its base (Context 213). These stones may have protruded into the old ground surface (Context 214) onto which the bank was constructed, in effect becoming what a modern engineer would describe as a “key”, a joint between the underlying layer and the bank.

### ***Excavation within Trench 3***

It was proposed that a trench (Trench 3), measuring 4m by 1m, should be excavated at a set of unusual earthen banks and stone revetments located outside the south-west corner of the enclosure. These features appear to enclose an area with a stream running through it. As such, it is possible that the earthworks represent the remains of a dam constructed for an industrial purpose, possibly to provide a mill-dam for a mill, or alternatively as a lint dam for the processing of flax (Figure 1). The work at this trench was hampered, however by time constraints and the level of work that the other three trenches demanded from the team. As a consequence, while de-turfing of the trench was undertaken, a decision was made not to proceed with the investigation, but to concentrate all efforts on resolving Trenches 1, 2 and 4, and Trench 3 was subsequently re-turfed.

### ***Excavations within Trench 4***

A trench measuring 6m by 4m was opened at the highest point in the enclosure to examine if any archaeological features might be present within the interior of the monument (Figure 1). Immediately after the extent of the trench had been de-turfed a 1m wide box section was excavated down its entire length along its southern side. No archaeological features were encountered, however, and the topsoil (a mid-brown sandy loam - Context 401) continued uninterrupted to subsoil level to a depth of 30cm. The rest of the trench was then excavated. There was some differential banding at the top of the topsoil, measuring about 1.0m wide, immediately beneath the sod layer. This was initially considered as a potential archaeological feature but further investigation suggested that it may have been the result of spade cultivation concentrating stones from the soil at the sides of the drills into which crops had then been planted. A number of prehistoric flint artefacts were discovered in the topsoil (Context 401) including a hollow scraper, a scraper and a possible broken projectile point.

## **Bibliography**

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## **Proposed Second Season of Archaeological Investigation at the Slievenacloy Enclosure, June 2016 (Figure 1)**

It is proposed that a second season of excavation be undertaken at the Slievenacloy enclosure during June 2016 in order to resolve a number of outstanding archaeological issues relating to the site. This excavation would be funded by the Belfast Hills Partnership through the Heritage Lottery Fund, with the work undertaken in partnership between the Belfast Hills Partnership, Queen's University Belfast, and the Historic Environment Division of the Department of Communities. As was the case in June 2015, this would again be a community-led investigation and one which would also act as the venue for the 2016 Level 2 undergraduate training excavation. It is suggested that Trench 3, which was planned for excavation in 2015, should be re-opened and investigated in full during June 2016. It is also suggested that a second trench (Trench 5) is opened to further investigate the morphology and structure of the Medieval house revealed in Trench 1, while it is proposed that a new trench (Trench 6) is opened to further investigate the interior of the enclosure. Finally, it is suggested that a second section (Trench 7) is opened across the ditch and bank enclosing the monument, with this trench placed along the western side of the enclosure.

### ***Trench 3***

As previously noted above, there are earthen banks and stone revetments located outside the south-west corner of the enclosure which appear to enclose an area with a stream flowing through it. As such, it is possible that these features represent the remains of a dam constructed for an industrial purpose, possibly to provide a mill-dam for a mill, or alternatively as a lint dam for the processing of flax (Figure 1). In June 2015 it was proposed that a trench (Trench 3) should be opened to investigate the nature of these features but pressure of time meant that this work was not realised and, while the trench was de-turfed, it was subsequently re-turfed before any further archaeological investigation could be undertaken. It is proposed, therefore, that in June 2016 this area is revisited for investigation, with an 8m by 1m trench opened to facilitate this work.

### ***Trench 5***

The archaeological excavation in June 2015 has successfully confirmed a Medieval date for the house in the south-west quadrant of the enclosure and has retrieved information on the construction of the walls and its internal organization. There remain, however, a number of

questions relating to the building and its functioning which can only be addressed through further excavation. For example, the hearth within the structure has not been located. One theory advanced during the excavation in 2015 was that this may have been a byre rather than a dwelling house and hence there was no hearth associated with the building. While this may indeed be the case, it cannot be accepted as such given that only half of the structure has been archaeologically investigated. The fact that the occupation material (Context 116) within the interior of the house was found to contain charcoal may indicate that there was indeed a hearth, but that it is located within the northern (and unexcavated) half of the building.

A further reason for additional investigation is the fact that it has not yet been established how the structure was roofed. While no definitive stone pads were encountered (of a type that might have once supported a cruck-type roof), further excavation is required to establish if pads exist elsewhere within the footprint or whether the earthen walls of the building were capable of load-bearing for the structure's roof. In addition, the discovery of Middle Neolithic artefacts and earlier, seemingly prehistoric, features set within the footprint of the Medieval house also require further investigation to establish if they represent evidence for settlement on the site during prehistory.

To conclude, further excavation would be required in order to fully understand the form and functioning of the Medieval house and the nature of the associated prehistoric features uncovered within its footprint. To address these questions, therefore, it is proposed that a second, 6m by 6m excavation trench (Trench 5) be opened to the north of Trench 1, with a 1m wide baulk separating the two units. It should be noted, however, that – as demonstrated during the June 2015 programme of work (see Plate 6) – the structural integrity of the house will not be affected by this work; the sod walls and their associated stone revetment will be left *in situ*, with the structure preserved beneath geotextile fabric, backfilled, and re-turfed to its original pre-excavation ground surface.

### ***Trench 6***

The nature of the monument at Slievenacloy would suggest that the monumental bank and ditch defences were required to protect the interior space and whatever was located within the enclosure. As such, further excavation would be required within the enclosure in order to better understand what it was used for in antiquity. The trench (Trench 4) opened in June 2015 was positioned on the high ground close to the centre of the interior (Figure 1) to establish if any

settlement activity could be identified at this dry elevated area, but – although prehistoric flint implements were discovered – no archaeological features were revealed. It is proposed, therefore, that a second interior trench be opened, also 6m by 4m in dimension, but at a slightly lower elevation within the enclosure.

### ***Trench 7***

The survey programme undertaken in 2013-2014 identified that the ditch and bank system that surrounds the site displays considerable variety in its morphology. On the northern side there is a single bank and ditch, but on the south and west of the enclosure there are apparently two banks and a single ditch. The section across the ditch and bank that was investigated as Trench 2 during the June 2015 excavation was located along the south-east side of the monument (Figure 1) and proved to be directly beside an Early Modern field drain. This hampered the excavation somewhat since, if disturbed, the drain would have flooded this otherwise relatively dry section of the ditch and this in turn would have led to the termination of the excavation. As a consequence, the drain was left untouched, but this prevented a full understanding of the ditch section to be achieved. As such, it is proposed that a second section (Trench 7) is excavated on the western side of the enclosure during June 2016 at a point in the monument's perimeter where the ditch is well preserved and two banks, one internal and one external, are visible. It is suggested that initially a linear trench measuring 14m from north-east to south-west by 1m is excavated but that provision is made to widen the trench across the ditch by an additional 5m by 5m depending on the depth of the feature as encountered during the investigation. At the end of the excavation the original ground surface will be fully reconstituted.

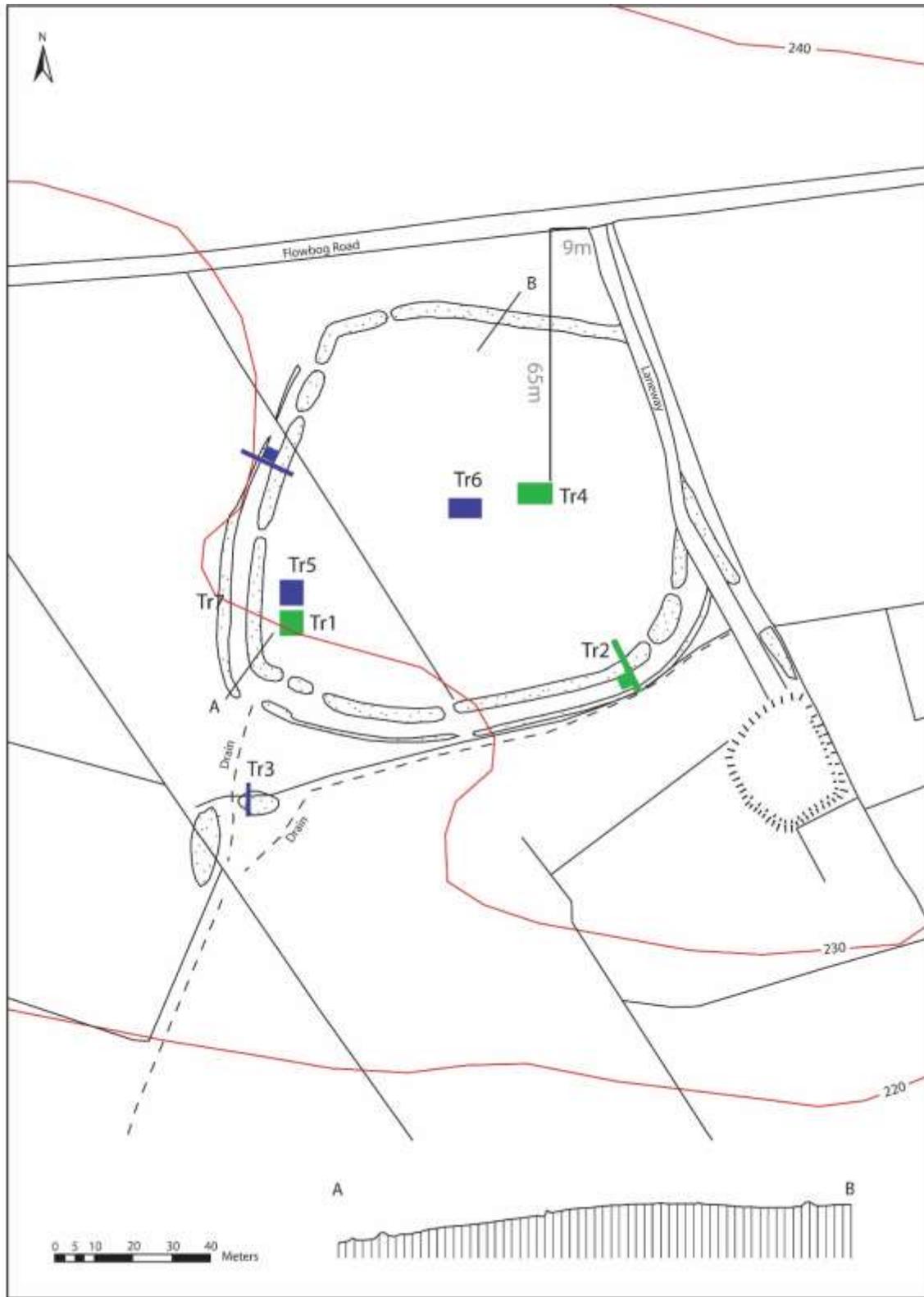


Figure 1: Plan of the Slievenacloy enclosure showing the location of the trenches investigated during June 2015 (in green) and the suggested locations for trenches to be opened during June 2016 (in blue).

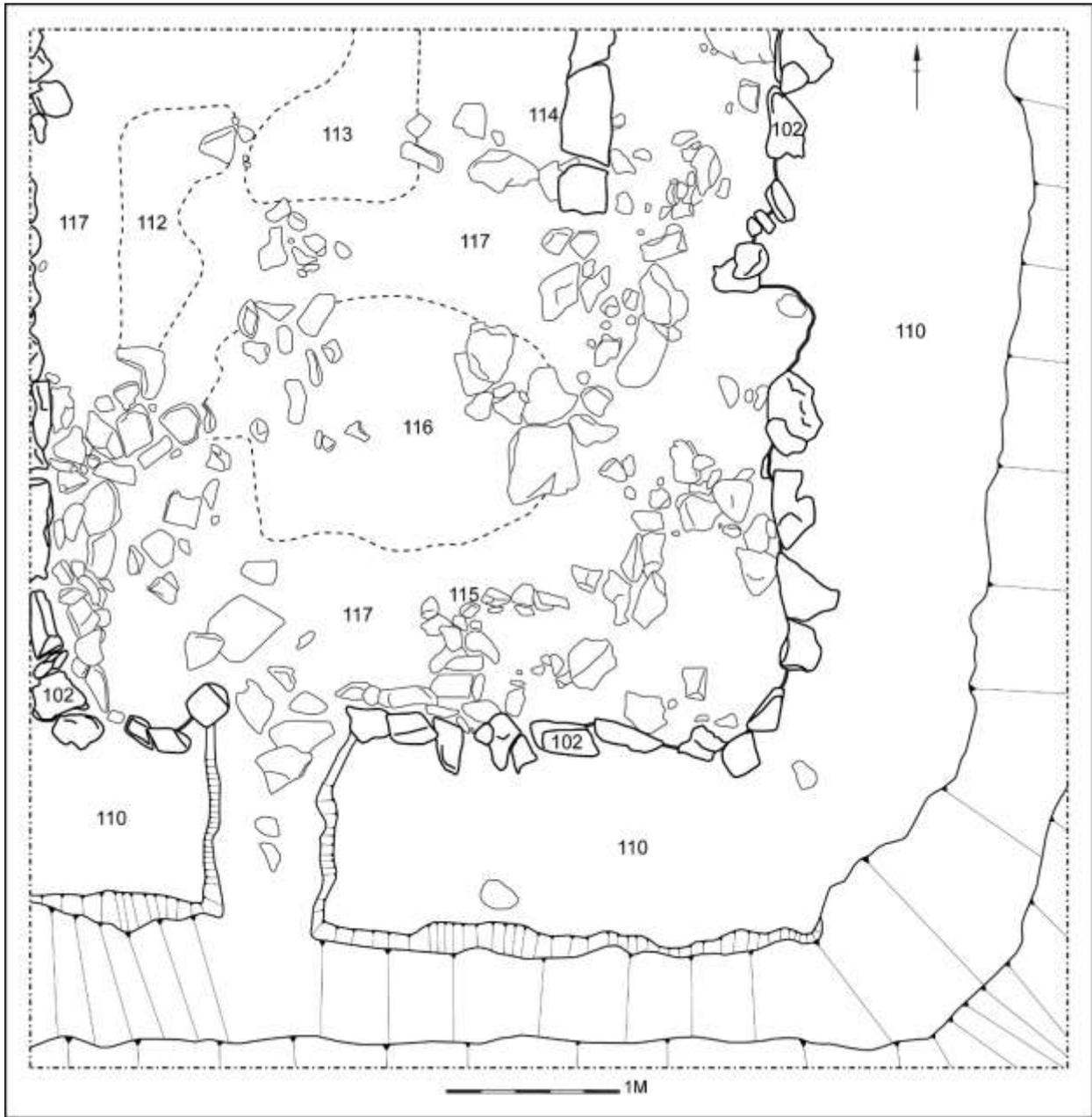


Figure 2: Plan of the Medieval house within Trench 1, as revealed in June 2015, showing: 110 – earthen wall; 102 – stone revetment; 114 & 115 – stone footings; 112, 113 and 116 – occupation materials; 117 – original pre-construction ground surface.

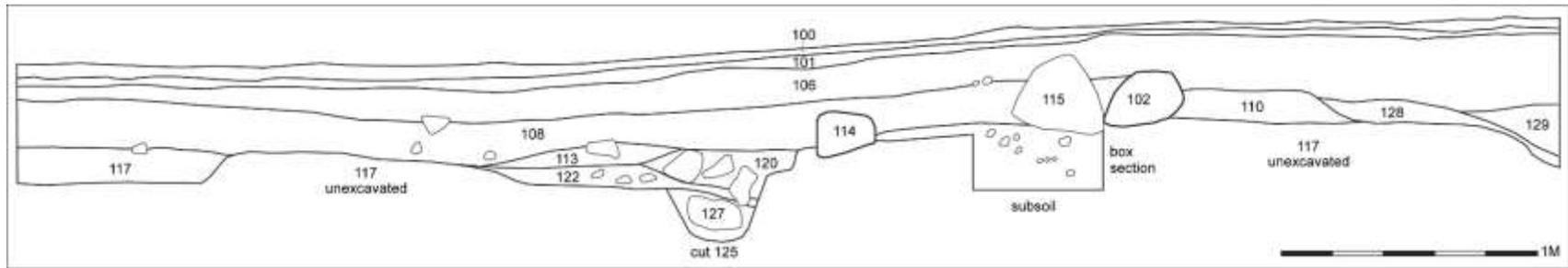


Figure 3: Trench 1, south section.

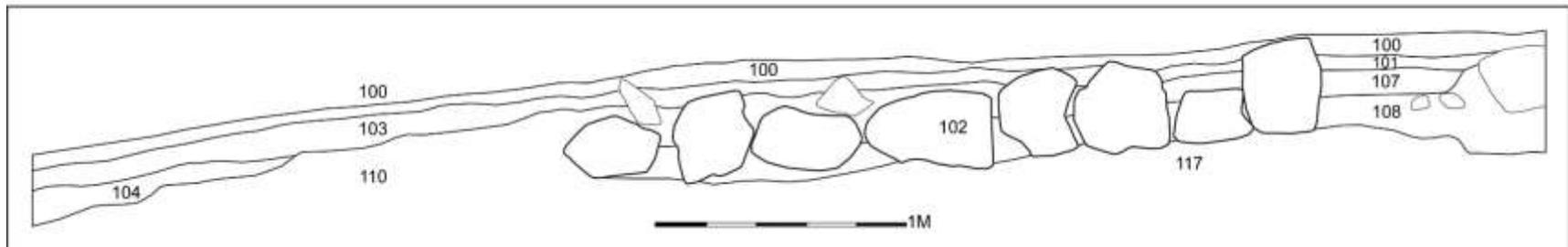


Figure 4: Trench 1, west section.

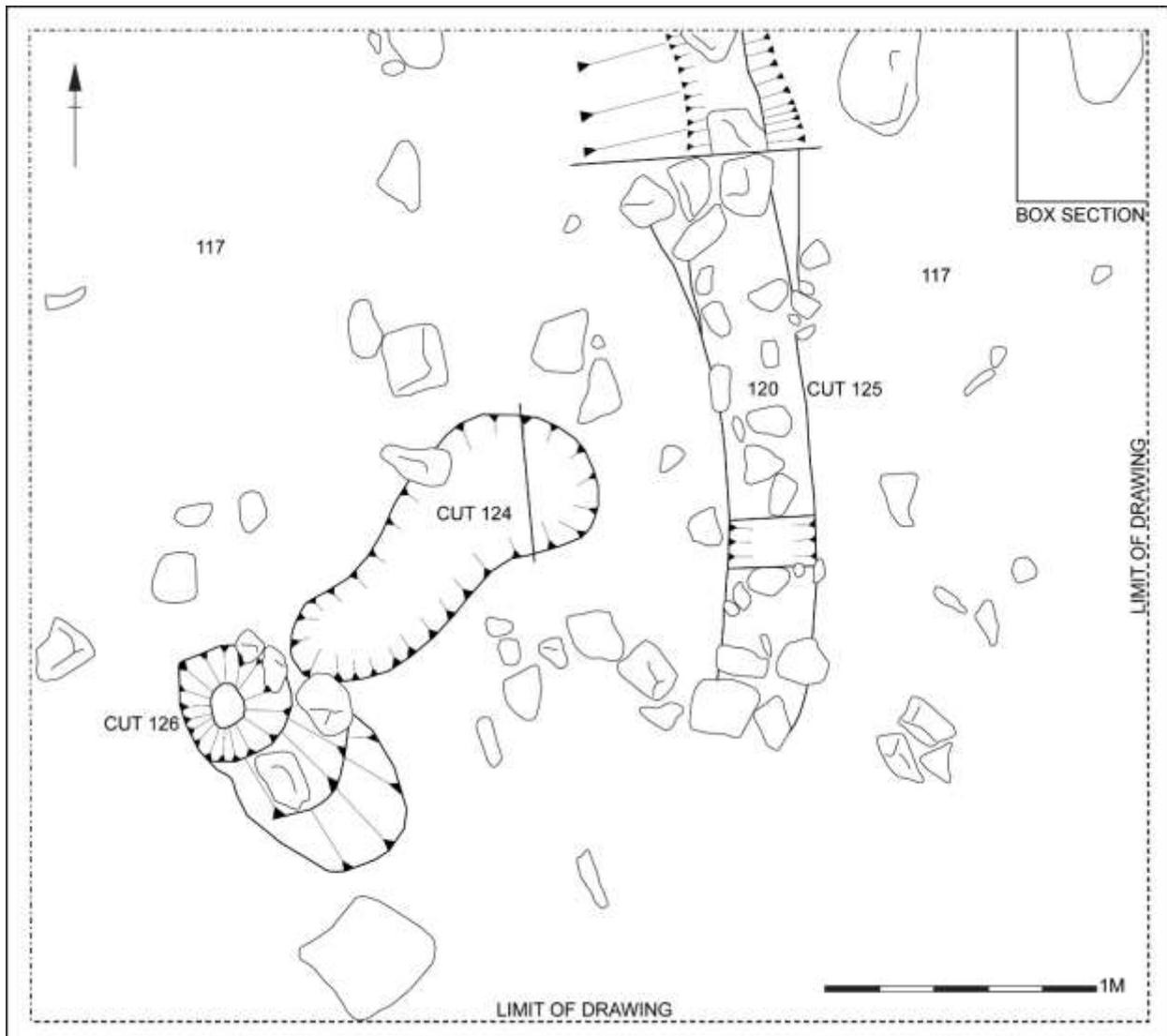


Figure 5: Plan of Trench 1, showing possible Neolithic features (c124, c125 and c126) located within the footprint of the Medieval house.

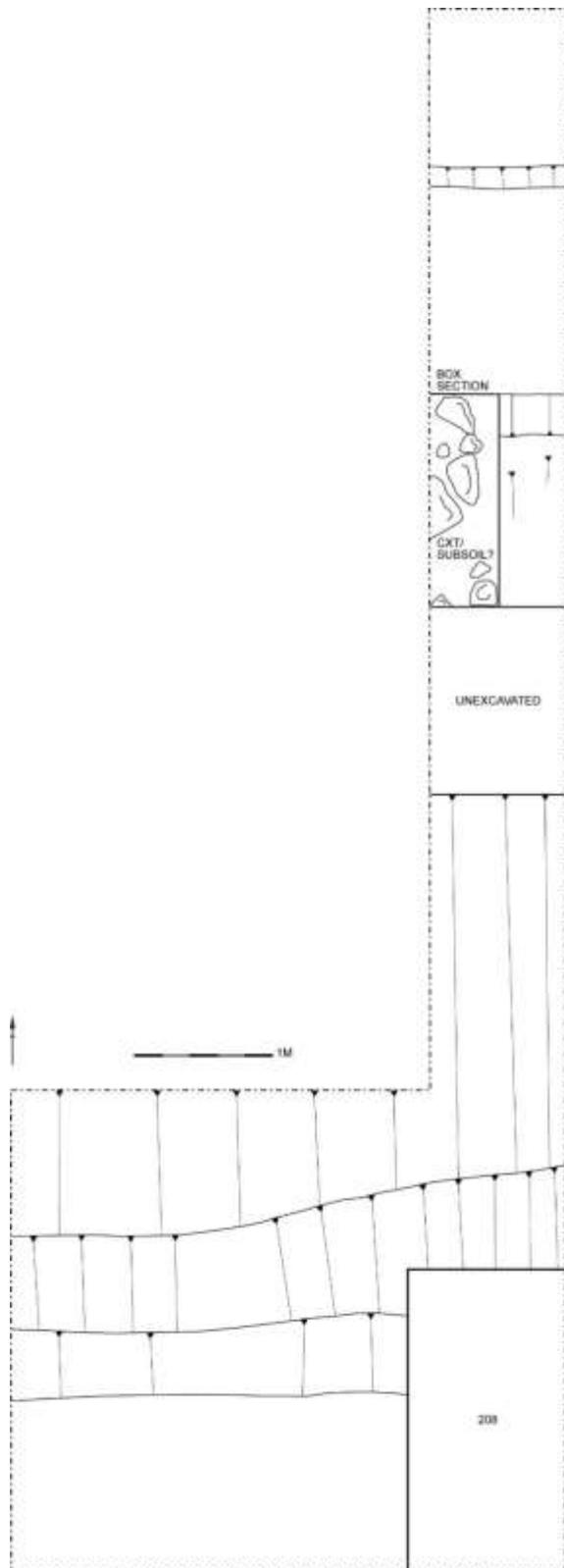


Figure 6: Plan of Trench 2, as revealed in June 2015.





Plate 1: Aerial view of the Slievenacloy enclosure, March 2014, undertaken during the Queen's University Belfast geophysical survey at the monument, using the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology's UAV – hexacopter.



Plate 2: Trench 1, the Medieval house exposed during excavation, June 2015, showing: 102 – stone revetment; 110 – earthen wall; 114 & 115 – stone footings; and 116 – occupation material.



Plate 3: Trench 1, showing the possible Middle Neolithic features uncovered beneath the floor of the Medieval house, June 2015, showing: 126 – gully; 124 – pit; and 125 – posthole.



Plate 4: Photograph of ditch section looking westward in Trench 2, June 2015, showing: 201 – turf; 202 – topsoil; 205 – large stone deposit; 206 – orange layer of clay; 208 – peaty layer; 209 – the cut of the ditch, cut into the original subsoil; 207 – lower blue clay subsoil, and 210 – orange subsoil.



Plate 5: Trench 2. View looking southward across the excavated section through to the interior of the enclosure, showing: gully (211); revetment stones (213); and the bank (203) to the rear.



Plate 6: Still-view from the 3D photogrammetric model of Trench 1 created by Dr Siobhan McDermott in June 2015 at the termination of the excavation programme and prior to the area being covering with geotextile fabric, backfilled, and the ground surface reconstituted to its original profile.